

The Novel - Background Information

Hawthorne wrote *The Scarlet Letter* in an astonishingly short period of time—between the fall of 1849 when his mother died and February 3, 1850, when he repeatedly read the conclusion of the novel to his wife. It tells the story of Hester Prynne, a young woman, in the Puritan town of Boston in the mid-1600s. Hester, found guilty of adultery, is sentenced to wear a scarlet letter A on her chest for the rest of her life. The story also involves her daughter, her daughter's father, and her husband, who arrives in Boston after a prolonged absence.

Using these circumstances as the framework for his novel, Hawthorne weaves around his characters a psychologically powerful tale of the consequences of breaking a moral code. Skillfully, Hawthorne investigates how guilt and sin operate on the innermost workings of his characters' minds.

Literary scholars have hailed Hester Prynne as the first true heroine of American literature. Hawthorne characterizes her as a whole person—woman, mother, sinner, and member of the community—rather than as a stereotype, as so many writers at that time cast their female characters.

In an era when most novelists were concerned with detailed portrayals of the outside physical world, Hawthorne presented mental and emotional truths. In a critical analysis of Hawthorne, Roy R. Male, English professor at the University of Oklahoma, writes:

Hawthorne possessed what one of his friends called "the awful power of insight," and his fiction remains valuable chiefly because of its penetration into the essential truths of the human heart.

Preferring to concentrate on the darker, often hidden areas of the human psyche, Hawthorne turns a scrutinizing eye on the thought processes and emotions that occur within the mind of the individual.

Even the otherwise modest Hawthorne admitted that "some portions of the book are powerfully written." Readers and reviewers agreed with him in spite of its subject matter, which was considered very risqué in the mid-1800s.

Many consider Hawthorne to be the first writer to truly represent American perspective and style in a work of fiction. Prior to Hawthorne, no American novelist had yet made an impact on

Europe's literary circles. According to Henry James, a later American novelist and critic, "the publication of *The Scarlet Letter* was in the United States a literary event of the first importance." Along with others, James felt "a satisfaction in the idea of America having produced a novel that belonged to literature, and to the forefront of it." Born and raised in the United States, Hawthorne steeped his novel in the early American past, creating characters and a plot that reflect the very roots of American culture.